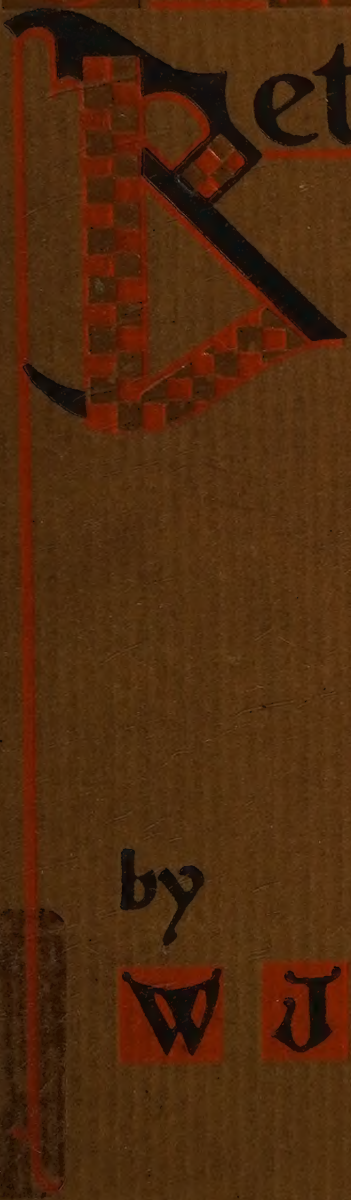
One Night In Bethlehem



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ONE NIGHT IN BETHLEHEM

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A CHRISTMAS STORY

BY

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I

ALARIC sat upon a gray rock at the roadside, gazing vacantly upon the golden splendour of Jerusalem, and meditated on his melancholy lot, and its growing hopelessness. The last rays of the setting sun made the Temple walls a hill of flame, and a biting wind had begun to blow. It would be a hard night for poor travellers like himself, and he was very weary. His feet were bound in rags, his cloak was thin, and the wind set his old wounds aching. Throngs of people passed him, eyeing him askance, as they well might, for he looked like a robber. He received their glances of fear and contempt with equal unconcern, for he had long ago ceased to expect from the world anything but hardness. At that moment his whole mind was concerned with the important question whether or not he should enter the great city. His hand, fumbling secretly in his rags, counted the few copper coins which were all his wealth, and he reluctantly admitted that the city was not for him.

This admission set him thinking of the past.

The various scenes of his life passed before him with a certain agonised distinctness, and he wondered how he could have sunk so low. Not that the various stages of his downfall were not intelligible: they were only too intelligible. He had reviewed them a thousand times before, had recognised their inevitable sequence, and yet had always ended with the same dull wonder that they should have happened to him of all men. He sometimes had a sense that they were all part of a cruel dream, and that he would wake presently to find himself once more standing victorious beneath a multitude of eyes in the great Arena, a man flattered by the plaudits of the crowd, distinguished by the adoration of proud eyes, remarked even by the Emperor himself.

For Alaric was a gladiator who had fallen on evil times. Long ago — so long he did not care to count the years — he had come from his Helvetian forests, in all his pride of youth, and had flung himself into the tumultuous life of Rome. He had challenged successfully the greatest boxers of his time. He had become famous. His statue, done in bronze, had stood close to the great gateway of the Arena. The statue stood there still for all he knew, and yet here he sat beside the road, clad in rags, lame, and with a few copper coins the sole barrier between himself and famine.

The contrast was so great that it would have been ludicrous had it not been so tragic.

His downfall had all come from his own foolish pride. He had forgotten in his arrogance of strength and skill that the most needful wisdom of the boxer is to know when to rest upon his laurels. Yes, he had forgotten that the greatest strength is not proof against the tooth of time. His skill remained unrivalled, but that could not avail against the slower beat of the heart, the stiffening muscles, the decline of the old alertness and resource. The day had come when he went down before a younger antagonist, who, like himself, had come fresh from the Helvetian forests. Nevertheless he had fought on for a time, until at last his defects were so apparent that the crowd which had once applauded learned to jibe at him. From the last of those hopeless conflicts he had been glad to escape with bare life, and then had begun the long story of his wanderings. He had gone from city to city, steadily sinking lower, until at last he had fled by night from Brundusium, and had hailed the chance of working his passage on an empty cornship bound for Alexandria. From Alexandria he had crossed to Syria, and the last chapter of his dismal epic found him sitting on a gray rock beside the Jerusalem road, marvelling in what fashion he should pass the night.

The wind was growing colder, for the sun had set. Jerusalem, no longer flushed with sunset fire, presented a gray bleak aspect, which was hostile and forbidding. The road, thronged an hour ago with eager travellers, was empty. The stars began to gleam, clear as points of ice in the empty sky, and the night was gathering. He arose and straightened out his stiffened limbs, looking vaguely up and down the road for some hint that should decide his dubious destiny. To the right forked another road, leading from the city, and this road, he noticed, still had many travellers. They must be going somewhere, where it might be hoped that at least food and shelter could be found. It was all one to Alaric which way he went; and having once determined that Jerusalem was impossible, he resolved to follow these travellers to their unknown destination.

He rose and limped slowly down the road. At about a hundred yards' distance rose the frowning gateway of the city. A Roman sentinel, standing at the gateway, challenged him.

"Your business?"

"I have none."

"Whither goest thou?"

"I know not."

"Your name?"

"Alaric."

The soldier eyed him curiously .

"Alaric," he repeated slowly. "Were you ever in Rome?"

"I was once well-known there."

"Not Alaric, the boxer?"

"I am he."

"Ah"—said the soldier, in a tone that might have implied either wonder or incredulity.

Alaric stood humbly before his inquisitor, his great shoulders hunched against the biting wind.

"Let me see your hands?"

He held out a pair of hands, broken, scarred, and battered with many conflicts. Only a boxer could have hands like these.

"I have had ill-luck," he said humbly.

"So I see," said the soldier. "It is something that might happen to any one of us. Well, if a small gift . . ."

He drew from his pocket two coins.

Alaric drew back, for he had not yet sunk to a beggar's temper.

"It is from a fighter to a fighter," said the soldier simply. "And see, here is wine. Drink, comrade, you are welcome."

Alaric hesitated no longer. He took the wine gratefully, and the rough kindness of the man heartened him more than the wine. It was also a balm to his hurt pride to find that here, so many

hundred leagues from Rome, he was known. He was half-minded to enter Jerusalem after all. It was possible he might meet other friends among the soldiers. On the other hand, he reflected, he might find himself despised, and his late experience had taught him that he was more likely to find contempt than kindness among those familiar with his story.

"Where does this road lead?" he asked abruptly.

"To Bethlehem."

"And what kind of a place is that?"

"I was never there, but they speak well of it. There are inns there which a poor man can use — so they say."

"Then it will suit me. May the gods remember your kindness to a wayfarer."

"The gods favour you," said the soldier heartily.

Alaric stepped out upon the road quite briskly. It was so long since he had received kindness from a human creature that his mind glowed inordinately over the soldier's trivial gift. He had felt much less elated over the gold that had often rewarded his victories in the old days. If he were not old and lame, he might yet get a new foothold on life. Who knew what might await him in Bethlehem? In a world where all was chance one never knew where the new chance waited; it came as likely as not in the most unlikely way; and perhaps after

all the gods might yet remember him. He no longer felt the chill of the wind. He lifted his maimed face to the sparkle of the stars, and there was a smile upon his lips.

II

The road to Bethlehem ran across a wide plain, and as Alaric pressed forward the moon rose, so that he was now able to distinguish some features of the country. Behind him lay Jerusalem, a hill of stately buildings, with here and there a torch flaring on the city walls. Before him the road ran white and straight, between low stone walls, which marked the boundaries of olive-gardens. There were few houses, and they were all mean, dark, and closely barred. It was an inhospitable land indeed for a poor traveller.

The moon rose higher, and Alaric was now able to discern many travellers beside himself upon the road. He could hear far ahead of him the sound of tinkling bells, the sharp cries of camel drivers, the soft thud of many feet. In spite of his lameness Alaric moved briskly, and he presently overtook a halted caravan.

The caravan appeared to be composed of rich Jews, who were evidently uneasy and alarmed at his appearance. From one of the camel-drivers he learned that they were bound for Bethlehem because a census was being taken, and this was the city of their enrolment. His mind misgave him at

the news. All these people crowding to Bethlehem would mean thronged inns, and scant accommodation for poor travellers. It behooved him to press on vigorously and get there before the caravan if he could. Fortunately the caravan was slow to move, and Alaric was soon ahead of it. Already he could see lights sparkling on the distant hillside, and here he divined was Bethlehem.

At a league's distance he halted at the foot of the hill. Beside the road he saw a white-domed building; he was about to pass it, when he perceived a man and woman, with a tethered ass, standing motionless in its deep shadow. There was something in their attitude that suggested weariness and dejection; these were clearly no rich Jews but poor folk like himself. He resolved to speak to them. It was at least possible that they might be able to tell him of some humble hostelry in Bethlehem that would suit his means.

"You are bound for Bethlehem?" he began.

At the sound of his voice the man and woman turned to look at him. Unlike almost every one he had met that day these people did not regard his gaunt figure with terror or suspicion. They were probably too poor, he reflected, to be afraid of robbers.

"We journey to the city of our fathers," the man replied gravely.

The words touched an unexpected chord in the heart of Alaric. His memory still held the vision of a rude hut among the forest trees, of a strong hunter father, of a deep-breasted woman in whose arms he had slept — all so far away. For him, the wanderer and adventurer, the world had offered many lodging-places, but no home, no place sacred by household ties.

"Then your home is yonder?" he replied, pointing to the lights upon the hill.

"Not so," said the man. "We are strangers in a strange land. Our home is beneath the wings of God."

Alaric wondered what the words meant. He stared stupidly at the little group, but could find no reply. The moon had turned the corner of the building, and he could now see the faces of the man and woman. The man's face was worn and troubled; the woman's calm and beautiful — he thought he had never seen a face so pure. At the man's feet lay a bag of carpenter's tools. The woman sat upon the tethered ass.

"What building is this?" he began again.

"This is a tomb," said the man. "It is Rachel's tomb. She died when her child was born."

A swift look passed between the man and woman, a look of tenderness and apprehension.

Alaric's mind moved slowly, but something in

that apprehensive glance made him aware of the relation of the man and woman.

"There is a great need that we should reach Bethlehem soon," said the man. "But we have travelled far, and the ass is weak and lame. Perchance God has sent you to be our helper!"

"There is little I can do, but I will do what I can," said Alaric heartily. It pleased him beyond words to find himself trusted.

"The God of Israel will reward you," said the man.

"I want no reward," he said proudly.

"Nevertheless, God does not allow himself to be a debtor," said the man.

Alaric did not pursue the theme. The truth was he did not quite understand the man's words. But he understood quite clearly that here was a need greater than his own, and he cast about in his mind how he could meet it.

"Do you know the name of any inn in Bethlehem?" he asked presently.

"There is an inn beside the gate," said the man. "It is there we hoped to sleep. But I fear me it will be full."

"I fear it too," said Alaric. "But I'll tell you what I will do. Give me your tools and bundles, and I will carry them upon my back. That will help a little. The ass is not so weak but that he

can go half a league further. I will get such lodging as I can for you at the inn. Follow me as quickly as you may, and when you reach the inn ask for Alaric."

"The inn is close to the gate," said the man.

"I will not forget," said Alaric.

As he turned to go the woman laid her hand upon his arm an instant, and turned her face toward him without any speech. And again he thought he had never seen a face so pure.

III

It was a strange errand that sent Alaric striding up the hill to Bethlehem, and he smiled a little grimly to himself as he reflected on it. Here was he, little better than a beggar, certainly a workless and an outcast man, and he had upon his shoulders an honest man's sole possessions. If he had a mind to steal them nothing could be easier. How simple these people must be to trust him! For all they knew he might be the merest robber, and yet they had trusted him. It seemed there must be good people in the world after all. He had had more than his share of man's inhumanity; he had been continuously jibed, insulted, and once nearly stoned by the disappointed populace since his downfall; and, being hated by the world, had come to hate it. But that day two things had happened which had drawn the venom from his heart. First there had been the soldier's rough kindness; second, the trust of these poor fugitives beside Rachel's tomb. And in these two things he found favourable omens. Perhaps, after all, the long run of ill-luck

might have turned for him. He found himself wondering whether this chance journey to Bethlehem might not mean something fortunate for him.

Certainly when he reached the city there was little to support his new hopefulness.

The market-square was thronged with caravans, the inns crowded. The whole place was loud with clamour and confusion. The inn beside the gate was, from its situation, more thronged than any other. It was in vain he sought accommodation.

"It is not for myself," he explained eagerly. "It is for a woman."

"It does not matter who it is for," he was told rudely. "And what sort of woman sends you, pray? That tale won't do."

His face darkened at the insult, and perhaps there was something in his grim aspect that proved a better argument than words. Fallen as he was, he was still formidable and capable of swift retaliation. The inn-keeper cringed before the gladiator.

"Well then, if I must, I must," he said; "go to the stable. You can find straw there." And he added spitefully, when Alaric was out of hearing, "Straw 's good enough for such a beast."

Alaric went to the stable. It was a rude shed built against the limestone rock. The mangers for the cattle were hewn out of the rock. Alaric gathered straw, filled a manger, and contrived to

compress his great bulk upon the narrow limestone shelf.

His first sensation was pure animal content that at last he had found shelter, and in the bliss of this sensation he forgot all about the fugitives at Rachel's Tomb. The place was warm and still; the clamour of the inn had grown faint, and there was no sound save the grunting of the camels in the yard, the slow movements of the oxen in the stalls, and the occasional trampling of some tethered beast. He had often been worse lodged, he reflected, as he munched his dry crust, and stretched out his weary limbs. There is a point reached in a life of great vicissitude when the most trivial advantage wrung from the world is magnified into a special victory. And he had reached that point. A man needs to be an outcast to appreciate the boon of mere shelter.

Then, sudden as the flash of a knife, there cut across his brain the memory of the promise he had given to the fugitives. Where were they? It was strange that they had not come. He rose quietly, crossed the camel yard, and went out into the square of the little city. The moonlight lay in frosted silver on the roofs, and the silence was intense. A single star of extraordinary size and brightness seemed to hang above the city. Far away, faint yet clear, he could hear the bleat of

flocks in the pastures that lay beyond the walls. He gazed down the long road which he had traversed an hour before, but he saw nothing save the black shadows of the olive trees arabesqued upon the white dust. Not a leaf stirred, for the wind had died away. There was not the least sign of his friends. He came back to his warm bed of straw among the cattle, yawned, and fell asleep.

It was about two hours before midnight when he was awakened by the sound of voices outside the stable door. He recognized at once the bitter, jibing voice of the inn-keeper.

"And am I to be dragged from my bed by such as you?" he was exclaiming angrily — "beggars, night-wanderers! Have I not told you there is no room in the inn? Away with you!"

"We are poor folk indeed, but not beggars," a man's troubled voice replied. "All we ask is a place to rest. The dogs' place beneath the table will suffice."

"There is no room even for a flea. Begone."

"There is one called Alaric here. He promised he would find us lodging."

"And who is he? A pretty tale, indeed. I know nothing of him."

"He is a strong man, but lame. Has no such man come to you?"

The inn-keeper laughed scornfully.

"My house is full of merchants and rich traders. I tell you for the last time there is no room for you. Begone."

"Then misfortune hath indeed overtaken us," said the man in a distressed voice.

Alaric lay still and listened. He was not minded to interfere. Long commerce with a hard world had taught him to seize and keep all the little he could get. Let some of these rich merchants give up their beds for the fugitives; that was but fair, for what did a single night of inconvenience count for them, in the long procession of their easy days? But for him, lame, hungry, ill-clothed, with old wounds aching, that possession of a resting-place was a boon unspeakable.

He heard the departing footsteps of the inn-keeper, and the grating noise of an ass's hoofs upon the stones. And then, in the deep stillness, he heard something more — the long, half-stifled moan of a woman in pain, and sudden shame seized upon him. He remembered that apprehensive tender glance between the man and woman when the man had spoken of Rachel's untimely death so many centuries ago, and he read their secret perfectly. And he remembered too their faith in him, and he cursed himself for a cur that he had forgotten his promise even for a moment. He sprang from his bed, and opened the stable door. He could see the woman's

form bowed over the neck of the tired ass, he could see the man slowly leading the ass out of the gateway, and the dejection and weariness of the little group affected him like a strong reproach.

"Stop, stop," he cried. "I am Alaric."

He ran towards them eagerly, and seizing the bridle of the ass, forced the ass's head toward the stable.

The woman turned her face toward him, and in the moonlight it was white as snow. She smiled slowly and her eyes shone.

"I knew you would not fail us," she said in a low voice.

Alaric bowed his head, and fumbled with the ass's bridle. His face was flushed with shame, knowing how nearly he had failed.

"May the God of Israel recompense you," said the man, gravely lifting his hand.

"I am unworthy any thanks," said Alaric in a rough broken voice. "I am an outcast, or at least men call me so. My heart has been full of many ill thoughts this night. It is but a chance that I have not acted as ill as I thought."

"Nay, you are our friend," said the woman.

At that word Alaric lifted his maimed face; perhaps it was the moonlight that illumined it, perhaps it was some other light kindled from within, but to the woman's eyes it was beautiful with contrition.

"Our friend, in whom we trusted," she concluded.

He could find no reply. He led the way in silence to the limestone shelf, with its huddled straw.

"Here are the tools and bundles," he said. "Here is a bed, such as it is. It is all there is."

"But it is your bed," said the man. "Where will you sleep?"

"I? O, I can sleep anywhere."

He was dreadfully afraid that they would thank him, and that was why he had no sooner shown them the manger than he fled.

In the camel-yard he found a pile of evil-smelling rugs, and in a sheltered angle of the wall made with them a rude bed. He lay down to sleep; but his mind was like a bright fire, crackling and kindling with a hundred eager thoughts. And besides this, there was something in the intense stillness of the night that affected him — something solemn, strained, expectant, as though all the world drew its breath and listened. It was something like the stillness in the great Arena just before the Emperor appeared. The star, too, which he had remarked an hour ago, seemed larger, and hung like a lamp directly above the stable. He could hear the bleating of the distant flocks, and once his skin crept, for it seemed as though white and shining presences flashed for a moment through

the air, and there was a faint sound of wind-borne music.

Then, suddenly, his blood thrilled indeed. From the stable came a soft moaning; it grew intenser and became a piercing wail, thrice repeated. There was no misaking that sound; it was the anguish of a mother's birth-throe.

He rose, and stood, at once thrilled and impotent; his great hands were clenched and the sweat stood upon his forehead.

Once more that wail smote the air, and then a long shuddering sigh.

"It is Rachel's Tomb. She died when her child was born" — the man's words went through his mind like a breath of ice, and he shivered.

He moved softly across the yard, and crouched at the stable door, listening. He dared not knock, still less dared he enter. He could hear the murmur of the man's comforting voice, and the woman's deep intaken breath. He was too absorbed by his pity and distress to remark how the light had increased, how the star which had seemed to him a lamp, appeared to have stooped lower, how that weird wind-borne music seemed to have floated nearer.

Suddenly he stood erect, his eyes wet with tears. The cry of a Little Child rang out, the Voice of the New Born.

And in the same instant the light became so intense that he fell upon his knees, awed and trembling; and upon the air, borne from the distant pastures, came a music so wonderful that he was afraid.

IV

He was aroused by the sound of hurried footsteps in the street and the clamour of excited voices.

One voice, clear and fresh, rose above the others.

"It was like this," cried the voice, "'*Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace and goodwill toward men.*'" The speaker half-sang, half-recited the words.

"It was even so, Reuben," replied a deeper voice. "We also heard it."

"And moreover the message was, 'Go ye to Bethlehem,'" replied the speaker who had been called Reuben.

"And behold we have obeyed," said the other voice, "and yet we know not what we have come out for to see."

The footsteps stopped at the doorway of the inn, and there was a whispered consultation. Presently a loud knocking on the inn door reverberated on the silent air. Lattices were thrown back, and lights began to shine in the windows. The whole inn was in commotion.

"What's this?" cried the angry voice of the inn-keeper. "Once already have I arisen from my

bed. Am I never to sleep? Am I to be the sport of every vagrant who knocks upon my door?"

"We are no vagrants," replied the voice which Alaric recognised as Reuben's. "We are shepherds, who guard the flocks of Elimelech the Bethlehemite."

"Go and guard your flocks, then," said the inn-keeper scornfully. "What have you to do with me?"

"We seek a babe lying in a manger," replied Reuben. "This night God has spoken with us, and told us that in the manger of an inn should we find him who is born King of the Jews."

Alaric was startled at the words.

He moved to the gateway of the camel-yard, eager to discover who these strange visitors might be. He saw a group of peasants, clad in sheep-skins, standing confused and doubtful before the door of the inn. The inn-keeper, now roused into furious passion, was berating them with evil words and fierce gesticulations.

"Dogs and swine," he cried, "begone. What trick is this you play upon me? A King in a manger! Did ever man hear such words of madness? Look to your words, for should Herod hear them . . ."

He was inarticulate with rage. "There are no kings here, and no babes, God be thanked. Surely

this is a night of fools, and may Gehenna open to receive all fools, say I."

From an open window a woman's voice spoke.

"Did they say they sought a babe? Methinks I heard not long since the cry of a little child. It may be it was a child in pain."

Alaric looked up and saw a face that had once been beautiful, before sin and greed had disfigured it. Alaric had seen many such faces in his wanderings, and it was not difficult to recognise them. To-morrow, when the lips were painted, the eyes darkened, and roses crowned the brow, men would deem this face desirable and lovely; but now, in the strong moonlight, all its emptiness and hopelessness were visible.

"I am sure I heard the cry of a child," she repeated. And, as she spoke, there was a note of pity and of yearning in her tired voice.

The shepherds listened doubtfully.

"Perchance after all we were mistaken," said one of them.

"Not so," cried Reuben. "She hath heard it, the crying of a child's voice. It may be God hath spoken to her as well as us. Let us search for the Child, for did not the angel say, *'This shall be a sign to you, ye shall find him lying in a manger'?*"

Alaric hesitated no longer. This story of a king born in a manger was as incomprehensible to him

as to the inn-keeper. But one thing he did know: he also had heard the cry of a little child, and his heart had moved within him at the sound.

He stepped out into the broad moonlight, and drew near the shepherds. At the vision of his gaunt figure, his fluttering rags, his maimed face, they shrank back in alarm. Only the woman in the window eyed him attentively.

"I will show you him whom ye seek," he said simply.

"Then it was a child's cry I heard," said the woman in a low voice.

"And we have found the place the angel spoke of," cried Reuben.

"Another madman," raged the inn-keeper.

But Alaric paid no heed to the inn-keeper's insult. Piece by piece he was fitting together the happenings of the night, and a growing gladness and wonder filled his mind.

"Come with me," he said, beckoning to the shepherds.

They gathered round him silently. The inn-keeper had disappeared. But the news that a child had been born in the stable had spread through the inn and the guests were rapidly pouring forth into the street. Among them was the woman he had seen at the window. She held in her hands a flask of wine and some oaten cakes.

"Take these," she said. And she added bitterly, "I may not come."

"Nor I," said Alaric. "But we may stand outside and look."

He gave the flask of wine and the oaten cakes to one of the shepherds, and pointing to the stable door said, "It is there."

And then Alaric saw a marvellous sight. The star, which had seemed to him a lamp, moved lower, and shed a long triple beam of light upon the stable. The door of the stable was flung wide, and he saw that the humble place was filled with a strong illumination. The low rafters gleamed like beams of gold, the very walls were washed with splendour. The oxen stood among the straw, with big meek eyes that shone like gems. And there, in the manger, sat the woman he had first seen beside Rachel's Tomb, her pure face full of peace, and on her bosom lay a little Child, lifting his tiny hands toward the light, and smiling.

"*Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace and goodwill,*" sang Reuben.

And the shepherds falling on their knees, sang the song with him.

But Alaric and the woman went no further than the door. Yet they also knelt, they knew not why, and the woman's face was wet with tears.

V

The dawn was beginning to break. The moon, not yet quite sunk, hung golden in the north-west, but to the eastward appeared a faint wash of silver; it spread like ripples of clear water; and in the higher heavens long shafts of rose and scarlet shot upward, and the day opened like a fan. Amid all this elemental splendour the star still burned bright above the stable. It held the gaze of the kneeling watchers so completely that the growth of day was unremarked.

So absorbed were Alaric and the woman in the wondrous vision of the stable, that they scarcely noticed the arrival of a new caravan.

Presently, however, a great clamour filled the air. There was the sound of tinkling camel bells, and the loud shouting of a pushing, struggling crowd. Two Ethiopians, armed with staves and white with the dust of travel, beat the crowd back. Behind them was visible a long retinue of servitors and camels. Clearly defined in the arch of the gateway with the rose-coloured sky behind them, appeared three figures, royally robed.

The foremost of the three was an old man, white-bearded and venerable. Upon his veined hand gems sparkled; beneath his cloak a vestment of crimson silk, embroidered with pomegranates, was visible; and the little bells upon the halter of his camel were of gold. At the saddle-bow of each was fastened a casket of beaten gold, set with rubies and turquoises.

"Room for Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar," shouted the men with the staves.

The inn-keeper, no longer weary and scornful, but humble and wonder-eyed, appeared.

"And what are these?" he cried.

The old man with the gems upon his hand turned toward him gravely.

"We be kings," he said, "and we seek a King."

"My lords," he replied, falling on his knees, "if it be for meat and drink ye seek, my poor house is at your service. But as for kings, there are no kings here, but yourselves — if such indeed ye be. This is but a poor, mean town which Herod himself hath never visited."

"It is not Herod we seek. We have already seen Herod, and it is from him we come."

At the dreaded name of Herod the crowd grew dumb. They knew too well his cruelty, his irresponsible freaks of malice, his bitter jests, and it

argued no good for them that these strange and stately men came in the name of Herod. The face of the inn-keeper was green with fear.

"If you will declare your errand," he stammered.

"Our errand is simple," said the old man. "We seek a child born this night in Bethlehem, a Child who shall be a King. The stars have told us of his greatness, and we come to worship him. Where is the palace wherein he lies? Show it to us quickly, for in haste have we come, and in haste must we depart."

"There is no such palace here, and no such king," said the inn-keeper. "We be a plain people, and dwell among our flocks. We be vine-dressers, olive-tenders, shepherds. Mock us not, my lords."

The old man turned to his companions, the one venerable like himself, the other a dark-bearded man in the prime of life. He drew from his bosom a scroll of parchment, and all three bent over it with eagerness.

"Listen to what is written by your prophets," said the old man.

"'*And thou Bethlehem, land of Judah, art in nowise least among the princes of Judah. For out of thee shall come a governor, which shall be the shepherd of my people Israel.*' Moreover, we have seen his star in the east, and over leagues of desert have we followed it, nor is it possible that we have followed vainly."

At the naming of the star, Alaric turned a startled face toward the three kings. The thoughts were racing in his mind. What did it all mean, this coming of the shepherds, and then this coming of the kings? It was quite unintelligible to him. It was a thing beyond reason that the man whose tool-bag he had carried should be the father of a king. And when was king ever born in the manger of a stable? And yet, amid all this contradiction of circumstance, one thing shone clear as the star above the stable: it was that something wonderful had happened that night. He himself had felt the wonder of the hour; he had seen the Babe in his mother's arms, bathing his little hands in the bright light, and he had knelt before the vision. It was likely enough that if he spoke he would be jeered at, and perhaps beaten; yet he resolved to speak.

He pushed his way through the crowd, his great bulk helping him, until he stood outside the gate, and, as he had expected, he was jeered and beaten. It was not often that a Jew had the chance to insult a Gentile, and the excited crowd eagerly availed itself of the unusual opportunity. One of the men with the staves struck him over the face, so that the blood flowed.

"Back, thief," he cried; for to him it seemed not unnaturally that Alaric had his eye upon the

golden caskets. At another time Alaric would have struck back with deadly skill, but he was now too deeply absorbed in his purpose even to remark the blow.

Above the tumult the grave voice of Melchior rang out:

"Let the man alone. It may be he can tell us what this tavern-keeper does not know."

"He is but a homeless dog," cried the inn-keeper maliciously.

"Nevertheless, let him speak," said Melchior. And then to Alaric, "Who art thou?"

"I am Alaric, the boxer," he said in a loud voice, "an honest man, but unfortunate. Ye seek a little Child, new-born. Such an one is even now in yonder stable. Whether he be a king I know not, but this I know, a star doth verily hang above his birthplace for I have seen it. Look, my lords, for it is not yet sunk."

"In a stable," said Melchior, in a disappointed voice. "This is a strange saying. It is a palace that we seek."

But while he doubted, Gaspar, the youngest of the three, had sprung from his camel, and so had seen through the gateway what the high wall still concealed from the others.

"Surely the star is there," he cried. "It is like a crown of flame above the roof. Melchior, Bal-

thazar, come; come quickly, for here is the end of that we dreamed."

Melchior and Balthazar hesitated no more. The camels knelt, with a great jingling of their golden bells; and no sooner did the two stand upon the ground than they saw above the stable, at the end of the yard, that which Gaspar had called a crown of flame, floating over the roof of the shed. And they saw at the same time through the open door a group of shepherds kneeling, and a woman with a Babe upon her breast, all distinct in a strong illumination. No sound of the tumult at the gate had reached them. It seemed as though a barrier, completely lucid but invisible, lay between them and the outer world.

The crowd, pouring in through the gateway, also saw that sight, and were dumb with wonder. It seemed to them an unreal thing, a picture painted on the air; and yet as they looked they could not but recognise that these kneeling men, whose faces shone with ecstasy, were no other than their own townfolk, and the shepherds of Elimelech. And as they gazed, thin as an echo, as if borne from an immense distance, they heard the high, clear voice of Reuben singing, "*Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace and goodwill toward men.*"

"Behold we have found our King," said Melchior.

"We have found our King," answered Gaspar and Balthazar.

And without another word they began each to remove from his saddle-bow the golden caskets.

They had totally forgotten Alaric, who stood just within the gate, at the extreme fringe of the crowd.

VI

Then, through the marvelling crowd, the three men passed, each bearing his golden casket high against his breast, and they entered the stable. At their approach the shepherds drew back, overawed by the stateliness of the three strangers, so that Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar came at once to the manger, and there they knelt, and each unlocked his casket with a golden key.

The first casket being opened contained precious frankincense, whose fragrance filled the place.

The second contained myrrh, which seemed a bitter gift.

The third contained a crown of gold, and this Melchior held aloft, as if he would place it on the head of the little Child.

At the sight of these gifts an excited murmur ran through the crowd, and men began to whisper to each other, "What manner of Child is this to whom such precious gifts are offered?" For all that they could see was that these folk before whom the three kings knelt were poor wayfaring folk, and strangers. The man's shoulders were bent, as are the shoulders of those who stoop

much over hard tasks, and the woman's robe was worn and faded, discoloured with travel over dusty roads, and deftly darned in places, as are the robes of humble women. But the three kings seemed not to see these things, for their eyes sought alone the face of the Woman. And there was a wonder and a sweet trouble in her face as she regarded them. She looked first toward her husband, and then towards the kings, and then at the Child upon her bosom, and, though she said no word, it was plain that her thoughts were busy in her. One could almost see the thoughts as they arose in her, as one sees bright bubbles swim up in clear water. And then, suddenly, her face became composed with a great peacefulness, as if she had reached some long-desired conclusion, and she began to sing in a low sweet voice. She sang with the Child's tender face laid close against her own, as if she willed that he should understand her words, and this is what she sang: —

"My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit doth rejoice in God my Saviour.
For he hath looked upon the low estate of his handmaid:
And, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;
And holy is his name."

No one but herself knew the meaning of the words, but she remembered how they had leapt unbidden to her lips long ago, in the time of her great trouble and distress, when she had sought refuge from evil tongues and cruel eyes in the house of her kinswoman Elizabeth, among the hills of Judah.

Yet it seemed as though the Child knew, for his eyes were fixed on hers, and he, of his own movement, laid his soft face closer to her own while she sang.

The three kings, gazing on her loveliness, and moved by the music of her voice, bowed low at her feet.

"The crown is for power," said Melchior solemnly, "for it hath been revealed to me that thy child shall be a King over multitudes of men."

"And the frankincense is for holiness, for wheresoever he shall come the perfume and purification of holy thoughts shall come," said Gaspar.

"And the myrrh is for sorrow," said Balthazar, "for what life is there that knows not bitterness? Yet through his sorrow shall many be made glad."

They rose from their knees, for each had said all that was in his heart to say.

The woman gazed on them silently, and in her eyes they could see a question form itself. After a

while she spoke, and said, "Yet is there another gift."

"What gift is that?" said Melchior, the oldest of the three. "Name it, and it shall be yours."

"It hath been already given," she replied.

Melchior gazed round the stable curiously. Amid the straw the three golden caskets glittered, but there was no sign of any other gift.

"It is the Gift of Love," she said softly.

And then, seeing their astonishment, she continued in the same soft voice, "Listen, and tell me, if I am not right. There was a man, a poor man and lame, who, after long travel, laid him down to rest upon a bed of straw to-night. He was very weary, and rest was sweet. There was a woman who came to his resting-place, and, although she asked nothing, this man understood her need, and gave up his bed to her, and himself sought a hard couch beneath the stars. This man set no value on his act, it was but a poor man's kindness to the poor; but it hath a value far above crowns of gold. He gave the only thing he had to give. He gave the Gift of Love.

"And there was a woman, sleeping softly in the inn, and her heart moved in her at the cry of a little child. She was a sinful woman, but her heart was pitiful. And so while others came in idle curiosity she came in helpfulness, for she brought with

her a flask of wine and oaten cakes. And she also gave a gift better than frankincense or gold; she gave the Gift of Love."

"Alaric," she cried, "where is Alaric, the giver of the Gift of Love? And where the woman who had a kind thought for a woman's need in her hour of pain?"

The words, so simply spoken, thrilled the crowd, who began to call "Alaric, where is Alaric?"

"She hath spoken wisely," said Melchior. "Now I see that there are better gifts than ours."

Alaric, standing in the shadow of the gateway, heard his name called, and turned, as if to run away. But in that moment a timorous hand was laid upon his arm, and he saw beside him the woman of the sinful life. Her face was very pale, and her eyes were wet with tears.

"She calleth you and me," she whispered. "Go thou. But as for me, I am ashamed to meet those pure eyes."

But the crowd had already recognised them, and now the people closed around them, and pushed them forward. The three kings stood back to give them room — and he, the lame boxer with his maimed face, and she, in whose eyes lay the knowledge of so many evil things, found themselves kneeling before the Mother and the Child.

And then a thing beautiful and lovely happened.

The Child, whose glance had not once been attracted by the glitter of the golden caskets, now stooped forward in his mother's arms, and stretched out his hands, till they rested on the heads of Alaric and the woman. It was as though, infant as he was, he blessed them, and understood. And from that tender touch there flowed into the hearts of Alaric and the woman a sense of peace and healing. Their hearts melted in them, so that all bitterness and pain passed out of them, and Alaric kissed the Child's hand, and the woman, stooping low, kissed the frayed edge of the Mother's garment.

"We have done nothing — nothing," said Alaric in a broken voice.

"You have given the rarest gift of all gifts," said the Mother. "You have given Love."

And then, lifting up her face, as though she saw something far off but very real, she said, "Now doth my spirit understand the ways of God, who hath not only visited the poor, but henceforth shall dwell among them. For out of poverty hath come the King, and through all ages shall he find his friends among the poor. For when the rich shall despise him, and the wise and proud reject him, these shall love him, and shall be glad to die for him; and so, to the world's end, none shall be loved as he is loved. And those whom all despise

shall seek him; and he shall give them pity for their griefs, and healing for their wrongs; for this night hath the love of God visited the world. Yea, henceforth, shall all men understand the deepest thought of God, that Love is All in All."

She ceased, but for a long time the little crowd stood silent, watching her in awe and wonder.

One other thing she did. She gently raised the kneeling woman at her feet, and laid the young Child in those arms which had never held a child of her own. And the Child lay there, smiling and content, and was not afraid.

"May I kiss him?" she whispered.

"Kiss him," said the Mother.

"And I too," said Alaric.

"And thou also, O Friend!"

And these two kissed him.

The dawn was now full and bright, and the star was quenched.

Then the three kings arose, and went out silently, with bowed heads; and each mounted his kneeling camel, and departed. For years to come they talked of that scene, and wondered what it meant, and they grew old waiting for the tidings of some new king who should arise to rule mankind.

The shepherds also went back to their flocks, and often in the years to come, when they watched

at night beneath the stars, they talked of what they had seen in Bethlehem, until at last the wonder of it lay in their memory like a far-off light; and they understood it not.

But there were two who understood.

The one was a woman with a tired, calm face and silvered hair, who dwelt in a little town beside the lake of Galilee, and spent her days in making garments for the poor, and balsams for their pains, so that she was greatly loved.

And the other was a man of great stature, who was servant to a certain centurion at Tiberias, and he also was greatly loved for the kind deeds he wrought among the prisoners in the fortress. For the prisoners were many in those hard times, when men were tortured and beaten for a hundred small offences; but Alaric would always tell them, while he bound their wounds, that things would change soon, that happy days were coming, that a certain King of Love was in the world, and that when he showed himself all men would love him, and learn to love each other.

And it is said — but the truth of this I know not — that the woman, standing on the shore of Galilee one day, saw a little boat, to which came a band of fishermen, and with them a Man pale with fatigue, who no sooner stepped into the boat than he fell asleep, with his head against the thwarts.

Then, being ever intent on kind deeds, she ran and fetched from her own couch a silken pillow, and laid it gently beneath the stranger's head; and behold, as she looked into that pale sleeping face, she cried, "The King has come! The King of Love has come!" And she bowed and kissed his feet, which were dusty with long travel, and bruised by the hardness of the roads; and the boat sailed away, with the Man asleep upon the pillow.

And it is likewise said that about this same time Alaric fell ill of a fever, and his master was greatly grieved for he loved the old man. Then the centurion said, "There is one who healeth men, they say, a Nazarene; behold I will entreat him for thee!" And the centurion set out to find him.

But while he was gone the sick man dreamed a dream. He saw again the stable at Bethlehem, and felt upon his mouth the soft cool lips of a little Child; and behold the fever left him, and opening his eyes, he saw dimly a beautiful shining presence in the room, and he sat up and cried, "My King, my King. Now I know the King has come."

And when the centurion returned, Alaric met him at the gate, and could say nought else but this, "The King of Love has come at last."

Of these things I know not the truth; but this I know that from that sacred night in Bethlehem, all things have gone differently with this old gray

world. For the greatest miracle of all that marvellous night was not that angels sang or that a new star shone; but that men learned that Love is all in all, and that the best of all gifts that God can give to man, or man offer to his fellow, is Love.

For stars grow dim, and sweet music ceases, and gold is scattered, and frankincense loses its perfume; but Love endures, and outlasts the world. And, moreover, to be simply kind and loving; to have gentle thoughts and generous tempers; to give but a cup of cold water to the thirsty, or to place a pillow beneath lowly heads, — this is the sum of all religion; and he who does these things shall see the King in his beauty, and shall one day behold the very God Himself, whose name is Love.

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